

NEWS AND NOTES FOR FLORIDA VETERANS

Veterans Service Center, VA Regional Office
St. Petersburg, FL

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The "News and Notes for Florida Veterans" is published monthly by the Veterans Service Center, VA Regional Office, St. Petersburg, Florida, to provide information on VA benefit programs to veterans and dependents in Florida. The material presented does not have the effect of laws or regulations. Please send questions or comments on this newsletter to Veterans Service Center, ATTN: "News and Notes," PO Box 1437, St. Petersburg, FL 33731. We do not have the resources to maintain a mailing list for distribution to individuals; however this newsletter is available on the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office web site at www.vba.va.gov/ro/south/spete.

2010 COMPENSATION & PENSION RATE

INFORMATION VA compensation and pension benefits cost of living allowance (COLA) is paid based on the Social Security Administration (SSA) COLA. Compensation COLA by statute may not be more than the SSA COLA and pension COLA is equal to the SSA COLA. This year SSA did not increase COLA. VA will be providing letters to beneficiaries informing them that there will be **no** COLA for 2010.

The Social Security Act specifies a formula for determining each COLA. In general, a COLA is equal to the percentage increase in the Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W) from the third quarter of one year to the third quarter of the next. If there is no increase, there is no COLA. For the December 2009 COLA, the increase (if any) in the average CPI-W from the third calendar quarter of 2008 to the third quarter of 2009 is measured. These averages are 215.495 and 211.001 for the third calendar quarters of 2008 and 2009, respectively, and are derived from monthly CPI-Ws developed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Because there is no increase in the CPI-W from the third quarter of 2008 through the third quarter of 2009, there is no COLA.

Assuming Congress does not intervene by enacting a general benefit increase, the next COLA would become effective in December of the next year that has a third-quarter average CPI greater than the average for the last cost-of-living computation quarter. For example, because there is no COLA effective for December 2009, the next COLA (2010 or later) will use the average CPI for the last cost-of-living computation quarter—the third quarter of 2008—as the base. That average is 215.495, so any future third-quarter average CPI must exceed 215.495 for that quarter to be a cost-of-living computation quarter. To further illustrate, if the third-quarter average for 2010 were 1.0 percent greater than 215.495, the COLA effective for December 2010 would be 1.0 percent.

ELIGIBILITY VERIFICATION REPORT (EVR) Eligibility Verification Reports (EVRs) are required for VA Pension and Parents DIC recipients because those benefits are

paid on the basis of a beneficiary's income and number of dependents. The EVR provides a report of actual income and dependency status in order to verify that payment is correct.

EVRs are issued annually. A claimant must be in receipt of income-based benefits by the end of August to be included in the current year review. New awards processed in September or later are included in the next year. Annual EVRs are no longer required for the current pension program recipients who have no countable income, or whose only countable income is from VA or Social Security. VA does not currently require annual EVRs from beneficiaries receiving pension under prior laws. Beneficiaries who are exempt from receiving EVRs receive a letter informing them that any change in income or dependency status must be reported to VA.

EVR forms and letters are mailed to beneficiaries at the end of December. If the completed EVR is not received by March 1, the account will go into EVR suspense, and benefit payments will be suspended beginning with the April 1 payment. If an incomplete EVR is received it will be returned to the recipient for completion and the allotted time for return of the EVR is extended by two months. An EVR is incomplete if it is unsigned, or all the boxes are not completed.

Persons with questions concerning EVRs should call the Pension Maintenance Center at 1-877-294-6380.

FEDERAL INCOME TAX AND VA BENEFITS All VA benefits are exempt from taxation. This includes the VA Work Study Program. Moneys paid to participants in the Work Study program are educational assistance benefits paid under the same Chapter under which the student is receiving educational assistance. VA does not issue W-2 or 1099 forms.

Secondary interest on VA benefits may be taxable. For example, if a veteran deposits his or her compensation check in an interest-bearing account, the interest is not tax exempt.

VA benefits are subject to collection for tax liens, i.e. in cases where the beneficiary owes the IRS.

Military Retired Pay: Veterans in receipt of military retired pay who are awarded VA compensation benefits retroactively may claim an exclusion on their income in the amount of VA compensation they would have received had they not been in receipt of military retired pay. Affected veterans should claim the exclusion by submitting the award letter showing the amount and effective date of compensation they would have received but for the receipt of military retired pay. If the veteran does not have the award letter, a suitable letter can be obtained by calling 1-800-827-1000.

VA TO SURVEY VETERAN HOUSEHOLDS (VA News Release) WASHINGTON –The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has launched a national survey of Veterans, active duty service members, activated National Guard and reserve members, and family members and survivors to learn if they are aware of VA services.

In addition to assessing awareness levels, the National Survey of Veterans will collect important health care, benefits, employment, and demographic information that VA will use to inform policy decisions and improve benefits. Recognizing a broader client base than just Veterans, this is the first time VA has included others, such as Veteran family members, in its survey population.

VA is mailing out survey “screeners” to more than 130,000 households to identify potential survey participants. The screener asks if anyone in the household is a member of one of the identified survey groups – Veterans, family members and survivors, active duty, Guard or Reserve members. Eligible survey participants then may be requested to participate in a full-length survey.

Participants will be able to select a preferred survey method: through U.S. mail, telephone or a password-protected Internet address. VA expects approximately 10,000 Veterans to complete the full-length survey. The data collection is expected to be finished by the end of February and the final report released by December 2010..

This is the sixth VA National Survey of Veterans since 1978. The information collected will help VA in its efforts to design and conduct outreach to Veterans. In addition, it will provide a clearer picture of the Veteran population’s characteristics to help evaluate existing programs and policies and measure their impact.

VA’S HOME LOAN PROGRAM A CONTINUED

SUCCESS (VA News Release) WASHINGTON – Despite problems in the nation’s housing market, mortgage loans backed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) had a lower foreclosure rate than any other type of home loan in the industry, as of the end of the last fiscal year. Additional information about the VA Home Loan Guaranty Program is available by calling 1-877-827-3702.

VA FACILITIES ADDRESSES AND TELEPHONE NUMBERS:

SUICIDE PREVENTION 1-800-273-8255

VA Regional Office, St. Petersburg - PO Box 1437, St. Petersburg, FL 33731 1-800-827-1000

Regional Processing Office, Atlanta, GA (education claims) - PO Box 100022, Decatur, GA 30031-7022 1-888-GIBILL1 (442-4551)
Telephone number for Chapter 30 self-verifications 1-877-823-2378

VA EFT Information Hotline (electronic funds transfer - direct deposit) 1-877-838-2778

Veterans Health Administration Toll-Free Hotline (medical care) - 1-877-222-8387

VA Health Revenue Service (information on amounts owed to VA Medical Centers) 1-866-793-4591

VA Insurance Center, Philadelphia (VA Insurance) - PO Box 42954, Philadelphia, PA 19101 1-800-669-8477

VA Health Administration Center (CHAMPVA and Spina Bifida health care) -
CHAMPVA inquiries: PO Box 65023, Denver, CO 80206-5023
CHAMPVA claims: PO Box 65024, Denver, CO 80206-5024
Spina Bifida inquiries and claims: PO Box 65025, Denver, CO 80206-5025 1-800-733-8387

National Cemeteries

10,000 Bay Pines Blvd N, Bay Pines FL 727-398-9426
6502 SW 102nd Ave, Bushnell FL 352-793-7740
6501 S State Rd 7, Lake Worth, FL 561-649-6489
4083 Lannie Rd, Jacksonville FL 904-766-5222
Naval Air Station, Pensacola FL 850-453-4108/4846
9810 State Hwy 72, Sarasota FL 877-861-9840
104 Marine St, St Augustine FL 352-793-7740

National Cemetery Administration Office of Memorial Programs (headstones and markers) - 5109 Russell Rd Quantico VA 22134-3903 1-800-697-6947

Loan Guaranty Eligibility Center (certificates of eligibility) PO Box 20729, Winston-Salem, NC 27120 1-888-244-6711

Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) Unit - Chicago VA Regional Office 1-800-829-4833

INTERNET SITES OF INTEREST:

VA Web Site: www.va.gov

VA Web Automated Reference Materials System (WARMS) www.warms.vba.va.gov

St. Petersburg VA Regional Office: www.vba.va.gov/ro/south/spete

Property Management (sale of VA-repossessioned homes): <http://va.reotrans.com/>

Federal employment: www.usajobs.opm.gov

Florida Dept of Veterans Affairs: www.floridavets.org

“Florida Vets First:” www.FloridaVetsFirst.com

Library of Congress (information on pending legislation) thomas.loc.gov